

The Light by EvieSmallwood

Series: [the tales of short stack and string bean \[15\]](#)

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Summary:

“Where do you see yourself in five years?”

El Hopper may not be grown up entirely, but she's getting there. And in the meantime, she has decisions to make.

The Light

Author's Note:

- For [FateChica](#).

For my wife. Lol sorry I lied ;D

This was a total bitch to write, until I had an epiphany at 4am a few nights ago. This is the result.

-

one:

'my love is like a...'

-

The heat wave of 1989 hits the residents of Hawkins like a freight train, leaving them with soaked shirts and glistening brows, and very little way to get cool.

The public pool is constantly crowded, despite the fact that everyone still has another month of school. Responsibilities and obligations drift to the backs of minds, fore-fronted with the constant complaint of *god, it's hot*.

And *is it*. El is seated in the passenger side of Hop's truck, back stuck to the leather seat despite her constant adjustment. Her feet are up on the dash. There's an air of complete nonchalance about her, which happens to be utterly authentic.

Hopper sighs and hands the slip back over. "I still can't believe you got detention."

"My record was too clean," she tells him. "Besides, it was a stupid reason. If anything you should be in there yelling at them."

Hopper grunts. "Whatever happened to lying low, kid?"

"Ended when I mastered levitation," she quips, and of course it draws a grin out of him. Conversations like this one—fast and quick, proof of progress—always make him smile.

“Alright,” he pulls his shades down to cover his eyes, “I’ll be back at three to pick you up. Don’t be stupid.”

“Right back at you.” El grabs her bag (full of books and paper and whatever else she might need to entertain herself), before she slips out of the truck and slams the door behind her.

Immediately, El is practically enveloped in the hot, stale air. Sure, Hop’s conditioning unit isn’t that great, but it had still been something. She’s almost certain these temperatures are going to kill her.

They’ve already broken her a little bit, anyway; she’s gone from uptight and worrying about her grades, about life, to not giving two shits about anything at all. It could, of course, be written off given they’re all graduating in a couple of months—but she has a feeling she wouldn’t be walking to detention if the scorching waves of hell hadn’t descended upon the town.

The hallways are vacant. Polished tile floor seems to sprawl for miles. Her sneakers squeak against the surface every now and then; startlingly sharp against the silence.

Room E17, a small classroom near the back of the first floor, is where she’s headed. The door is wide open.

But *of course*, he’s not there yet. No one but the teacher is.

Fuck.

El sets her pink slip on Mr. Murran’s desk, sinking into a chair near the back of the class. Her expression is probably a perfect mask of teenage angst, complete with a brooding frown as she glares out the window.

Mr. Murran doesn’t even look up from his crossword book as two other students file in. El doesn’t recognise them, but the look pretty young, so she figures they can’t be in her grade.

Then something squeaks, a hand slams against the doorway, and *there he is*.

Strands of messy hair stuck to his forehead, sweat bleeding into the collar of his shirt, eyes wide, lips red, panting. *Hot.*

He meets her eyes and grins, and she rolls her own in return. *It's your fault we're here, Wheeler. And to think, we could be doing dirty awful things by the lake right now.*

Mike doesn't reply. He adds his slip to the stack and then ducks right into the chair behind her.

"Alright, you're all here," Mr. Murran rises from his chair. "I gotta take a whiz—uh, relieve myself. Stay here, think about what you've done, and all that."

He points at them like dogs, with the stance of someone who never mastered the subtle art of intimidation, but still tries.

He leaves, and it's not five minutes before the desk behind El's grids as Mike pushes it closer, and then she's melting (actually sinking down lower into her chair, eyes fluttering closed) as his lips brush the back of her neck. "Hey."

El's breath is short. She swallows, licking the salty perspiration from her cupid's bow. "What are you doing?"

Mike trails down to her shoulder, and then back up, before pressing a kiss in the curve between her neck and ear.

"Thinking about what I've done," he replies, a hand sweeping her loose curls from one side to the other.

El bites her lip. "You're not thinking," she argues. "You're re-enacting."

He sucks on her neck in a way that's *absolutely* going to leave a mark, but her hair will probably cover it. El finds her eyes fluttering closed, completely forgetting about the handful of freshman sitting in the front half of the classroom. Mike's arm snakes around her waist and lifts the thin cotton of her tank top, fingers brushing her bare stomach—

"Really?"

They don't jump apart like they used to. It's more like a lazy, exasperated drift. El pins Mr. Murran with a sharp stare.

"Hey, weren't you *all over* Mrs. Litz on Wednesday?" Mike asks, tone a little challenging and a little amused.

Mr. Murran's cheeks tinge with red. He straightens his back. "That's none of your business, Wheeler. Please keep your hands off of Ms. Hopper for the remainder of detention, unless you want another."

Mike raises his hands in mock innocence, leaning back in his seat. El wants nothing more than to groan aloud, or cause a diversion and bolt with Mike, but all she can manage is to throw her head against the desk.

She closes her eyes as her forehead makes contact with the cool wooden top, circling her arms around her head so that she's bathed in darkness.

Hands on her thighs. Lips on her lips. Fingers in her hair—raking through it, scraping her scalp; she can still feel it. Hot and burning and dizzying. The way his torso had pressed against her own, the way his tongue had felt with hers. She can't breathe as the memory surfaces, so clear and raw.

It had looked pretty bad, sure, but they hadn't really been doing anything this time. Still, Mr. Murran had seen her legs around Mike's waist with her perched on an unused teacher's desk and made all of his assumptions.

They'd *never* do it at school. Especially not on a gross desk. Who would?

Mrs. Litz, comes Mike's wry voice, interrupting the stream of thoughts that she hadn't exactly realised were open.

Her cheeks flame. *What do you think you're doing?*

Eavesdropping, he replies. *It's cute that you can't get me out of your head, really.*

El bites her lip. *You weren't supposed to know.*

How often does that happen?

Don't flatter yourself.

Mike scoffs audibly, which looks ridiculous coming from nowhere. He covers it, coughing.

She manages to block him out, even though she really doesn't *want* to. It's just so exhausting, thinking about this stuff and hearing his voice but not being able to act on what she wants, even when he's less than two feet away.

The hours pass by. After a bit, El pulls out a book. When she glances behind her, she sees that Mike is deep in planning a campaign, or maybe outlining his book. He somehow feels her stare, though, because his eyes meet hers and he pouts like a dog that just got kicked.

El resists, though. She resists, and manages to distract herself with the stupid plot line of the stupidest book of all time. It's some romance novel she'd found in-between the cushions at Mike's house.

Of course, she can't help but imagine her and Mike doing all these things, and it just makes it all so frustrating, because they could be, but they're in detention, since apparently *someone* can't keep his hands to himself.

She slams the book closed, making most of the occupants in the room jump.

Her psychology textbook will have to do.

Mrs. Johnson had assigned them to read the second to last chapter, which El is halfway through. She flips to her dog-eared page.

Chapter 15, Section 3: What Drives Us; Hunger, Sex, Friendship, and Achievement

"I'm gonna rip my hair out."

"Don't do that, I like your hair." Mike leans over her shoulder, reads the title, and grins. "Problem, shortstack?"

El turns to glare at him, but then she's *looking* at him, and she sees how dark and absorbing his eyes are.

"Yeah," she gets unbearably close. "I was hoping you could read this one out loud to me."

Mike snorts. His gaze drifts to her lips, though. It's all without heart except *this*. "Well—"

"Wheeler!"

"I swear to god," he hisses, before sitting back.

Mr. Murran sends them a last warning glance. Then he's back to filling in his crossword.

El flips through the pages slowly and lazily, skimming but not really reading.

One in the afternoon becomes two and she still doesn't have any notes. *Does it even matter, though?* A part of her wonders. She could probably stop turning in her homework right now and still manage to have all A's and B's in her classes.

Mr. Murran scans them. "Seven letter word for a hard touch, present tense?"

"Groping," Mike pipes up.

"Figures the virgin wouldn't get that one," mutters one of the freshmen.

Mike balls up a paper and throws it in their general direction (it of course misses the likely intended target of the girl's head, because he's a complete dweeb and can't aim for shit). "Uncalled for an untrue," he says. "Mr. Murran has done plenty of things with Mrs. Litz."

"Thank you, Michael—wait—I have *not*—"

El bites down on her fist to keep from laughing.

Minutes pass. Her eyes stay locked on the clock, watching the little red arm slowly circle and circle and circle. She might scream.

It's so hot, so stuffy. She feels like she can't breathe. There's only one fan, and it's on Mr. Murran's desk, and fuck, if things don't move faster she might just break it so they can all suffer.

It would only take a twitch, anyway.

All she can think about is Mike. All she can concentrate on is the sound of his pencil on paper, writing blissfully away as she agonises in her seat. She might start writhing soon.

God, humidity makes her dramatic.

El manages to jot down a few things, but it's all mostly interrupted by El Wheeler and El Wheeler-Hopper and Jane "El" Wheeler.

"Alright, inmates, your sentences are complete."

She goes about packing away her things as casually as possible, even though Mike is already hovering nearby and waiting for her.

El stands. She shoulders her bag, pushes her sweaty hair from her forehead, and jerks her head toward the door.

The other students are racing down the hallway, yelling loudly and acting like they really *did* just get out of prison. Mr. Murran passes by them, winks, and ducks into an office.

They walk slowly, though. Hand in hand. Her heart is racing in her chest.

They're about ten feet from the double doors when the thought of *fuck it* occurs and she yanks him by the arm, straight into the nearest supply closet.

With the smallest nod the door is locked behind them. It's dark, but her hands find his torso. Her fingers curl around his shirt before lifting it up and over his head.

Mike pushes her against the wall. "Who needs it, right?"

Then his lips are on hers—forceful and hungry; *devouring*. Her mouth slants against his own and then it's all just his tongue and her tongue and teeth scraping against lips. She can't even think anymore. He tastes like sweat and plain beeswax chapstick, salty and a little sweet.

El runs her hands up and down his back. He shivers against her, and it makes her grin. She *loves* how responsive he is to her touches, to her kisses. She loves the way he moans against her mouth when her fingers clash with his soft, curly hair.

God, she'd needed this.

Necking Mike Wheeler, with all of the sharp gasps and *groping*; with the mutterings of her name as she gives him hickey after hickey—it's pretty much the greatest thing of all time. She'd decided that at fifteen and she hasn't found an activity that tops it in her book since.

He just falls apart against her, all loose. His hands slip under her shirt to hold onto her ribcage as she presses kisses against his collarbone and his neck and then lower, on his chest. It's perfect place, since she doesn't have to strain at all. She can feel his heart beating erratically, sped up, skipping.

"El," he breathes. She knows if she could see him, he'd look like he'd just been zapped with a taser, or something. Fucked up hair and wide eyes, flushed cheeks, a parted mouth. He squeezes her around the middle, pulling her as close as humanly possible, before he starts to return the favour.

It's about time, is what she thinks, and then there are no more thoughts. Just the sensation of him and her, her and him. El nips at his ear. Mike's breath hitches. Her hands slide up his chest, chasing that little noise and making it better, louder.

"Y'know, I said I wouldn't screw you in the school," she manages, "but I'm seriously reconsidering right now."

Mike forces her back against the wall again. It's rough, in a way he rarely is, but it drives her so damn crazy. It makes her want *more*. "Yeah?"

“Yeah,” she kisses him again, an unrestrained whine escaping her as his hands travel just a touch higher, *yes, god, yes.*

Is she really about to have sex in a dark supply closet?

Possibly.

Well, she definitely *would* have.

But then a fist slams against the door.

“It’s Mr. Murran,” a voice calls (absolutely killing the mood, crumbling it, strangling it). “Hopper, your dad is waiting for you outside.”

El doesn’t have time to think. *Dad, waiting, late.* She slips her top back on while Mike does the same. She could kill this man. She could punch him right in his god-damned face—

Mike opens the door. Mr. Murran is standing there, looking exasperated beyond belief. “Do you know I should give you detention for this?”

They exchange glances. El feels hope bury the dread in her stomach. “Yeah?”

“Well, I’m not gonna,” he holds up a hand to stem their talking. “This once, I won’t, because you’re seniors, and we’ve all been there, and it’s a hundred-and-six fucking degrees outside. So please. Fix your hair, button your buttons, and get the hell out of this building so I can go home.”

Mr. Murran will always be El’s favourite teacher. She can’t believe she was ever mad at him.

They oblige, even after he’s stalked off to get his things. Mike walks her outside into the unbearable heat with a promise of *see you tomorrow, shortstack.*

God, she’s gonna marry him.

two:

how it begins

-

“Where do you see yourself in ten years?”

El shifts in the uncomfortable upholstered chair. “What do you mean?”

“Career wise,” the counsellor—a brown haired woman in her mid-thirties, El figures—elaborates. “Or school wise, maybe.”

“I...” El swallows. “I don’t know.”

She really doesn’t. It’s so uncertain, so dark. She can’t visualise what she’d possibly be doing at twenty-eight, or what she’d look like, or anything.

“Alright,” Ms. Douglas clicks her pen. “Maybe five, then.”

“What am I doing here?”

A blink. Ms. Douglas hesitates. “You received detention recently,” she says after a minute, probably deliberating over her words. “First time it’s ever happened to you. I’m just... a little curious, is all.”

“Would it be so bad if I became a complete screw up right now?” El wonders aloud. “I mean, we only have six weeks left.”

“A lot can happen in six weeks,” Douglas throws out, half-jokingly. She sighs through her nose when El doesn’t even crack a smile. “I just wanna make sure you’re doing okay. Is everything fine?”

“I got caught making out with my boyfriend,” El says. “Everything is *great*.”

She actually can’t believe she just said it out loud. But then, she’s sort of been doing a lot of things a little carelessly, lately. Talking, thinking... her judgement has been totally thrown off by the heat.

Or maybe, her mind whispers, *you’re just growing up*.

Douglas hums, leaning forward with intrigue. “Your boyfriend? What’s his name?”

“Mike.”

“Mike,” Douglas repeats. “And how long have you two been going out? A year?”

“Five.”

“Five months?”

“Five *years*,” El corrects, rolling her eyes.

Ms. Douglas is silent for a moment. She cocks her head, almost marvelling. “That’s a long time,” she remarks. “*I’ve* never even had a relationship that lasted longer than three.”

“I love him,” El shrugs.

“Do you see yourself dating for ten?”

“Not dating,” is what tumbles out of her mouth, automatically.

It almost makes her stop short. *Five years*, she thinks.

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three:

hypothetically

-

She can’t stop thinking about it.

Five years plays constantly in her head, amidst so many various scenarios, but though it all there’s just one constant, present no matter what the circumstances are.

El looks up from the paper she’s writing. It’s on *The Catcher in the Rye*, which she hadn’t minded much, but she can’t concentrate for two reasons—both of which are manifested by the scene in front of her.

Mike lays sprawled out on the couch in the basement, moaning his discontent at the heat. Like, really; all he's doing is moaning. His face is pressed into the cushions, making his voice all muffled.

"Mike," El taps her eraser, "I'm trying to write."

"But it's so *hot*," he whines. "When is it gonna stop?"

He's not wrong. The heat is so thick she can actually feel it around her. She hates the way it feels when she breathes; almost like she's ingesting a liquid. It sticks to the walls of her insides the same way it does to her skin.

But she really, really needs to write this. Even if school is gonna be out soon, it's still worth ten percent of her grade. A last big project, her teacher had said.

So El stretches her hand out, pulling the electric fan from its place by the fort over to the couch, instead. With a twitch of her head, it starts whirring to life. Why he couldn't just do that himself...

All is silent for another half hour or so. El manages to finish counterarguing her rebuttals and closing it all off with a flourish, *Holden Caulfield was not mentally ill, he was merely affected so deeply by the death of Allie that he lost all sense of faith, and was stripped of his childhood innocence.*

"Done," El announces.

Mike shifts so that his face is visible. "Can I read it?"

"No," El goes over, grabbing her backpack to slip it in.

Mike pouts. "Why not?"

"Because you'll just argue with my point of view," she says.

He huffs. "I don't do that. Do I do that?"

"How about this," El drops down so that she's sitting on him, legs draped over his thighs, "you can read it if you promise to keep your mouth shut."

“I can’t even say it’s good?”

“Well, you can say *that*.”

Mike takes it after promising. El watches, stupidly anxious as his eyes scan the paper, taking longer than she expected him to. When he’s done, he frowns. “Why would I argue with this?”

“I don’t know,” El rolls her eyes. “But now you’re arguing that you’d ever argue in the first place, and that’s stupid.”

Mike grins. “It was good.”

“Yeah?”

His hand is on her knee and she has no idea when it got there. She can’t think.

“You’re really good at being convincing,” he comments, handing it back over. El drops it into her bag.

“So what would it take to convince you to... oh, I don’t know, take your shirt off?”

Mike laughs. Then he’s pulling the thin white cotton shirt up over his head, and *oh wow*.

The muscles in his stomach are even more pronounced given how much he’s been swimming, lately. His entire chest is also covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Suddenly, she can’t remember who she is or where she’s from.

He tugs at her blouse gently—some old pink thing she got from Nancy way back when. “Your turn?”

El grins. Only she doesn’t take off her shirt. But she she does kiss him; long and deep, memorising the feel of his lips against her own, tasting almost metallic with sweat. She straddles his waist, moaning easily when he squeezes her upper thigh beneath her skirt.

Mike leans back, looking dazed, like he’s been punched. His eyes are wide, breath short, cheeks even more pink than they were before.

He's so pretty when he's like this—when he's vulnerable and wanting.

Suddenly his lips turn up. El finds herself face to face with a devil-may-care grin.

Mike flips her onto her back. El squeals in surprise, but then she's giggling uncontrollably as he blows air against her stomach.

"Mike, stop!"

"Ticklish?"

"Yes—" he untucks her shirt and pulls it up, exposing her stomach, and does it again. This time it's so much *worse*. "Mike!"

"Sorry, I couldn't hear you. Did you say more?"

"I hate you," she protests, around uncontrollable giggles.

"Well, that's unfortunate," he says. "Because I happen to love you a whole lot."

He's said it maybe a thousand times. Before her classes or after a bad dream, when they're on the phone, sometimes just out of the blue—and each time, it surprises her. It takes her breath away, leaves her stunned. He *loves* her. He feels how she feels; he gets that churning warmth in the pit of his stomach, and the skipping in his heart, and that fogginess in his brain. He loves *her*.

El doesn't even know what she's doing. She just knows her shirt is now unbuttoned and open. Mike trails his lips—wet and light, leaving goosebumps—all down her chest. He presses soft, sweet kisses against her stomach. There's something so adoring about it.

Five years, she thinks.

And in five years, clear as day, she sees something she wants. She sees something that clicks. She sees this; him, eyes dark and full of so much emotion, kissing her over and over right here, only her belly is bigger, swollen.

He's gonna put a baby in there, she realises, so suddenly her breath catches. Obviously not today, or anytime soon. But *five years...* it's a long time.

I want him to, comes next. *Really, really bad.*

"Mike," El reaches out to play with his curls, pushing some away from his face. "Do you want a big wedding or a small wedding?"

One step at a time, she thinks.

Mike stops. He looks up at her, frowning. "What?"

"Hypothetically. Big or small?"

He's silent, considering, studying her face. "I want what you want," he says. "I don't mind either way."

"I don't want a big wedding," she says. She's hated the idea forever; being in front of all those people, doing something so *intimate*, making promises no one else should be allowed to hear.

"Okay," Mike's frown slowly fades. "What brought this on?"

"How many kids do you want? Hypothetically?"

"El," Mike laughs, now hovering over her, their noses so close they almost touch. "I don't know. Somewhere between one and however many is too much."

"So you don't *not* want kids?"

"Shortstack," Mike says, "are you pregnant?"

"Oh my god, *no!*"

Mike laughs when she whacks him, before grabbing her hand to stop it in motion. "I don't wanna talk about hypothetical kids right now."

She rolls her eyes. "Well what *do* you wanna talk about?"

"Nothing," he replies. Then his lips are all over hers, kissing her so deeply it makes her moan. His fingers are warm against her back. In

no time at all, it's completely bare, and five years is the farthest thing from her mind. All that matters is now.

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four:
something soon
-

The week of their graduation, Max comes barrelling into El's bedroom, demanding that she *get her ass out of bed and put on something nice*, because they were going to a grad party.

El hates parties. Particularly ones involving lots of people and alcohol, which she'd assumed she'd made pretty clear over the years, given that every time she was invited to one she turned it down—not to mention every time they *did* go, Max usually ended up getting wasted, which left El as her primary caretaker.

They're just so... obnoxious, and gross.

Even so, El puts on an outfit she hopes passes as nice; a knee-length sundress with little orange roses and her trusty pair of converse. She doesn't put on makeup, considering it'll just melt off. Even without the heat wave, the weather's still been so unbearable.

Instead she smacks on some lipgloss and calls it quits.

Max goes for a more party-friendly look; torn up, acid washed jeans and some old band shirt, cropped just below her waistline, exposing a small strip of her midriff that's definitely meant to drive Lucas crazy.

Turns out, it works, because within ten minutes of getting there the two are *nowhere to be found*.

And neither, unfortunately, is Mike.

Will stays with her for a while. They talk about how excited they are for Jon to come home. But then El looks up once and he's just gone.

El hovers by the wall for a while, nursing a cup of beer she'd gotten as soon as she'd arrived. It's so loud, and there are so many people. She can't stand it, but there's no way she's just abandoning Max, even

with Lucas here.

El sips a little more of her drink. And then some more. Before she knows it, she's downed it in an attempt to cope with the way her breath keeps quickening and her pulse won't go down.

It helps. She feels so much lighter, so much better. *More*, she thinks. This time she goes for the punch, which is sweeter on her lips with less of a kick.

She doesn't know how much she drinks, just that it's a lot. It's too much. The world is spinning and she really, really needs to find Mike.

El works her way through the house, pushing through the masses of sweaty bodies.

She reaches the living room, but he's not there. None of her friends are. It's just a bunch of popular jocks and cheerleaders—having a last hurrah, El supposes.

She makes to walk off, but someone grabs her hand. El looks down at a meaty fist and finds herself face to face with one of those damn mouth breathers.

He smiles. It's really unpleasant. "Wanna dance?"

El tries to jerk her arm out of his grip. "No."

But he only holds her tighter. His name is Tony, she thinks. Tony from the football team. A lot of girls gossip about him in the locker room. El doesn't know why.

"C'mon, Hopper, it'll be *fun*," he says. "Besides, your boyfriend's too busy getting wasted outside to even notice. Just one dance?"

His finger comes up to touch her cheek, which she will *not* allow. "Let me go," she says. "Now."

One last chance.

Tony yanks her toward him, puts a hand on her ass, and smiles like it's no big deal. "I don't think I will."

Alright, chance is up.

She really isn't supposed to do this, but who cares? Who's gonna believe a drunk Tony over respectable, straight A student El Hopper?

So she jerks her chin, just the slightest bit, feeling the energy pulse through her entire body before it focuses elsewhere, like a magnet drawn to a pair.

Retracting her arm is really no trouble. Tony wails on the ground, clearly in pain. "What the fuck? *What the fuck did you do?* You broke my wrist!"

"It's a sprain," El snaps, rubbing her own. "Next time when a girl says no, she means it."

"You're fucking crazy!"

"You're a fucking asshole," she returns, sure to keep her voice low, unlike him. El turns to see that most of his stupid jock friends have cleared out. God, did they think he'd screw her right here on the living room couch?

El rolls her eyes. *Outside*, Tony had said. *Mike*.

But there's hardly anyone out front—just a couple of younger looking students spreading toilet paper across the lawn.

Out back, the air is much clearer than the smoke-filled haze inside. El breathes it in, relishing in the clarity.

There's plenty of people around the pool—not to mention in it. She really can't blame them, given how warm it is still, even after dark. She remembers older summers, suddenly, when the air had turned cool after sunset. They'd spent them in the woods, near Castle Byers—telling ghost stories and roasting marshmallows; or in Mike's basement, playing long games of D&D, staying up too late watching dorky movies, and laughing so much their sides hurt.

That's all over now, isn't it? She realises, very suddenly. Sure, it doesn't mean it's over between all of them... but the innocence, the wonder, the childhood. It's over.

El wipes the blurriness from her eyes. She scans the crowd and makes sees no sign of him, or anyone else she knows. Where did Will go? Where are Max and Lucas?

El walks around the side of the house, hoping to find some peace and quiet. She discovers, instead, what must be makeout central. There are like three different couples sucking face, all mindless of one another.

The garage door is empty. Music plays from some stereo, not as loud as the house. In the centre, there's a keg. A couple of guys are playing ping-pong, a few more are clustered around—

Around a boy with dark hair, who's chugging a shotgunned beer.

Her boy.

It stops El in her tracks, less so because he's drinking and more because it's maybe the hottest thing she's ever seen; watching his adam's apple bob up and down, shirt stretched up to reveal just enough of his stomach, all without spilling one single drop.

Mike finishes, crushes the can, and gives a little bow. Dustin, who's beside him, cheers.

El's eyelids feel heavy, but god, he looks so handsome; with that hand-me-down black jacket Jon gave him and the freckles on his cheeks. He's just reaching for another beer when she walks up.

Mike grins. "Hey, Shortstack."

"He's so wasted," Dustin chuckles. "He had, like, five."

El folds her arms over her chest and pretends really hard to be pissed. "This is what you've been doing all night?"

"Dustin's fault," Mike waves it off. "I wanted to come find *you*."

"Uh-huh," El nods. "Give me one."

Mike raises his eyebrows. "You sure? It comes out super fast. All comes down to the ideal gas law— $PV=nRT$. When you poke the

hole, you don't change the volume itself, but you increase the gas moles at the top of the can, and your suction at the hole forces it out quicker—"

"I don't know what any of that means," El says. "Just give me a beer, Stringy."

Mike throws up his hands, takes the can Dustin offers, pulls out the army knife Hopper gave him for his sixteenth, and pierces the aluminium with exact precision.

"Pop the lid," Mike instructs.

El does. The warm liquid practically falls into her mouth, running past her lips and down her chin. She chugs, as quick as possible, and then crushes the fully empty can.

"Yeah, El!" Dustin cheers. "That's my badass lady friend, gentlemen!"

Mike is *looking* at her. Like, looking at her; all heavy and meaningful, biting his lip.

"You wanna get out of here?"

He jumps at the chance. "Oh my god, yeah."

"You two are so gross!" Dustin calls after them.

The moonlight spills over his bare chest, highlighting the shadows his lean muscles and collarbones create. He's all sharp, staring up at her with parted lips. Then he smiles, cocking his head.

"See something you like?"

El loves his eyes. They're dark, and intense; absorbing. She loves that stupid, teasing tone he uses when he's like this.

God, he's so cute.

"I see stars," she replies, leaning down to kiss the bridge of his nose, brushing over a cluster of freckles. They're better than any

constellations. He's her universe, and his gravitational pull shifted her axis the minute he found her in the rain. She's totally, completely done for.

Mike's cheeks tinge with pink. "You're so pretty."

El giggles. "You're like, in love with me, huh?"

"How ever did you guess?"

"We've been dating for five years," El says. *Five years. From there to here. What comes next?*

"It's been half a decade," he marvels. "Hey, why aren't we married, yet?"

El hums. She runs her lips down his neck, feeling him shiver beneath her. "We'll get there when we get there."

"So we're getting there?"

"Mike," El rolls her eyes. "*You* won't get anywhere if you don't take off your pants."

But then his lips are on hers, mouth moving against her own in some sloppy, hot frenzy. He kisses her so hard he makes her moan, pulling her against him.

And that, what with her straddling his waist and all, drives them both crazy.

El breaks away, breathless. Mike whines in dissent, but then gasps (*god, yes, she loves that sound*) as she moves over to his ear, tugging and sucking on it, feeling him squirm.

His eyes open. He looks almost hungry. Determinedly, Mike undoes the top button of her dress. Then the second, and the third.

She wriggles out of it as best she can, only it gets stuck in her hair halfway off her head.

Drunkenly and stupidly they work at untangling her curls from the

button.

“Clutz,” Mike chuckles, tossing it aside.

“Nerd.”

Mike is already working down her neck, though, leaving hickey after hickey. She falls against him, breath caught in her throat until he does it hard enough to release a sound—something between a gasp and a hiccup. Every bruising kiss leaves her skin tingling. It sets her on fire. “*Mike...*”

She’s never wanted him so much, never needed him this badly.

It’s all it takes to get him to grab her by the waist and flip them, so that he’s on top of her. He holds onto her ribcage, making her feel almost delicate in his grasp.

But he kisses her roughly, making her moan against his mouth. El pulls him a little closer, letting her fingers get lost in his hair, and falls apart at his touch.

The windows are foggy. She’s a little winded, but feels slightly more sober. El finds her clothes, pulling her dress on, fingers fumbling with the buttons. Mike’s hands close over her own. He fastens the last few for her, biting his lip. “Cold?”

“Yeah.”

He offers her his jacket. El puts it on. It smells like smoke, warm and rich. She smiles gratefully, before pulling on his arm so that they’re lying down again.

She fits against him like she was made to. El wraps her arms around him, letting her eyes flutter closed as his fingers interweave with her hair—now loose from its braid and falling down her back.

El traces his jawline. It makes him grin sleepily. “Did you have a good time?”

Anything is good with him. Fuck, just lying here, with her torso

pressed against his, is fantastic.

El nods. “Yeah. You?”

“Mmhm,” he presses a kiss to her nose.

Tonight was good. Tomorrow will be too. So will the next few weeks. Then he'll be gone, and you'll be alone, because all good things must come to an end.

El feels her insides wither. She holds him tighter, burying her face in the crook of his neck, and tries her hardest not to cry.

She won't lose him, right? He won't find someone else? He won't discover there's a whole world outside of Hawkins, Indiana, and there's so many... better, *normal* girls?

El had worked off insecurities like these long ago. Something about him being him, and knowing how he felt—just being around him, she knew there was nothing to worry about. But now it's all coming back, and it's so much worse because she won't be with him.

El swallows it all down, though; she's being completely ridiculous, and she knows she'll only make him feel bad for doing something he wants to do. She won't hold him back, she won't be that dramatic girlfriend that stops him from following his dreams.

But she will stay here, in his arms, and breathe him in. She will memorise how his heart beats; *two, one, two*, against her own. She will memorise the shape of him, the smell of him, the feel of his skin against her own. She will hold onto this, imprint it in her mind, remember it when things get hard. Remember that even if he's gone, he's always with her. He's with her now, in the back of his lightly used Pontiac, half asleep and lazily pressing his lips to her shoulder.

“I love you.”

Mike meets her eyes, concern on the edges of his features just threatening to impose.

She won't cry. She won't.

But she will kiss him.

Sweet and soft, yet it's enough to make her brain melt. She pulls back after a minute, putting her hand on his cheek.

Mike looks at her like she's his whole world. It makes her feel like she is. "I love you, too."

"Always?"

Her voice sounds small. She needs this, though.

"Always," he says, voice confident and firm. He understands even if he doesn't know why. "I mean," Mike grabs the chain around her neck, holding the ring up. "Why do you think I gave you this?"

El grabs it. The metal is cool in her palm. She fiddles with it, before slipping it onto her finger, though Mike keeps his eyes on her face.

El bites her tongue. She can't wear it yet. She can't. Even if all she wants to do is promise forever, it just... isn't soon yet.

And so she slips it off her finger, watching the light go out of his eyes. But she keeps it in hand, toying with it. "I want to tell you a secret."

"Yeah?"

"Every night, when I go to bed, I wish you were with me. And I always think about why I haven't said yes, and why it's taking me so long, and how much that must hurt you—"

"It doesn't—"

"I *know* it does," El shakes her head. "But the thing is, I can see it. It's not that I don't want it. It's just that... I want now. I want now without having to think about forever."

She draws in a breath. "I want forever. I do. I want... I want kids—god, you have no idea how much I think about that—and I want to make you happy, and that's what this means, you know? I wear this, and that starts. Maybe not right away, but... I just don't want it to

end, yet.”

Mike grabs her hand. The ring presses between their palms, digging into their skin. “Okay.”

She doesn’t realise she’s crying until the tears have spilled over, running hot and ticklish down her cheeks. “Yeah?”

Mike blows one away. It makes her smile. “Yeah,” he says, grinning back. “Soon.”

-
five:
carpe diem
-

It’s the first day of summer break; a day of overwhelming freedom for all of them—but especially El, because she won’t even be going to college in the fall. She can’t shake the constant nagging realisation that *this is it, it’s the start of everything*.

The end of everything, too.

It’s with these thoughts that she sits by the edge of the lake, arms drawn around her shins, watching the still blue water ripple in the afternoon sun.

(she’ll come here a lot, during the next year; remembering this day, remembering the sound of the Ramones blasting from the radio and Max’s squeals as Lucas throws her into the water. she’ll remember this feeling, heavy in her stomach, like some rock she’ll never be able to rid herself of: nostalgia)

“Hey, Shortstack.”

El lifts her head, squinting slightly in the light until she doesn’t have to. Mike blocks the sun out, his shadow looming over her. There’s some crooked half smile on his face. His cheeks and nose are a little pink, and she knows he’ll have even more freckles in the coming weeks.

“If you’re thinking about throwing me in the lake, you can forget it.”

Mike grins, falling down next to her. “No,” he says, resting his arms on his knees. “You just looked a little sad, I guess.”

El hums. She barely registers when his fingers reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, until they’re gracing her neck, instead.

Mike’s hand trails down, stopping at her wrist. She holds out her own. Their fingers intertwine, so naturally and perfectly. Her hand, small within his—skin smooth, a little darker. His own with the bones all visible whenever his fingers flex, long digits, palm just a little rough from working with computer parts for years.

Will it always be like this? Will it always be so easy? Or will time create some chasm between them, so deep it can’t be filled?

El looks at him, soaking up the sight of Mike Wheeler, her boyfriend.

He looks ethereal, with the sunlight glistening against his jawline and his dark, thick hair falling into his eyes. It’s curled from having gotten wet, brown strands standing out with the golden glow of the day.

She never wants to look at anything, or anyone else.

“What’re you thinking about?”

“Just you,” El looks down at his knuckles instead. “I just...”

Mike leans a little closer. “Just’ what?”

With a suddenness that almost strikes her, it’s not about that, it’s about *this*; about the heat—between and around them. About the sweat on his back and the outline of the muscles on his stomach, clear whenever he draws in breath. It’s about his lips, the lower one caught between his teeth; the softness, and the upward quirk to them.

“Wanna go make out?”

El laughs. “God, yes.”

Live in the moment, she reminds herself. *Carpe fucking diem*.

Fuck, yes.

Her mouth moves against his own like it wasn't made for anything else, tongue pressing against his, teasing and wonderfully raw.

Mike draws back, hovering over her. He's very aware of her legs wrapped around his waist, and how her chest rises and falls with every heavy breath, how her hair falls across the seat; her eyes are wide and her pupils are blown, cheeks red, lips parted. *El.*

Then she captures him again. This time it feels more fervent. Mike grips her upper thigh, squeezing, and she moans. *Oh, fuck, yes.*

This is the best thing, the best part; when all of the tension bleeds out of her and she melts against him, completely open. It drives him crazy like nothing else can, and it only gets worse with every gasp and sigh.

That feeling rises to a pinnacle when she whispers his name, so full of need. "Mike..."

He's already pulling the strings on her top. Then, like magic, wow, it's just gone.

The hand on her rib cage rises just a bit higher, and the way she arches her back—fuck, he's just done for.

It's really, really hard to take. It's hard to move slow, like this, but he does it anyway; he presses heated kisses to her jaw, to her neck, to her collarbone. Sucking and grazing, revelling in the sounds she makes. El's nails dig into his back. His hand is just reaching *there* when—

"Dudes! For real?!"

A fist collides with the side of his car, so hard it jostles them both.

Mike rips his lips from her skin. Max is leaning with her back against the window, head still shaking. "What do you want?"

"Go away," El pipes in, completely unbothered that she isn't even wearing a top.

“We’re *leaving*,” Max tells them. “We wanna go back to your place, though. Play D&D. Can you guys, like, get dressed and pick up food or something?”

Mike’s head falls against her shoulder. He wants to say *no, they cannot, they’re busy*—but she taps him. “I’m starving.”

Mike drives, which El doesn’t mind at all. It’s so much better being next to him, with the freedom to put her hand on his thigh, to lean over and pepper his neck with kisses.

He’s grinning. She loves that look; totally shot and trying not to show it. “Do you want me to crash this thing and kill us both?”

El hums, sucking hard enough to bruise. “I want you to pull off,” she says, fingers trailing farther up his leg.

Mike shivers, yes, before swallowing roughly. “Sounds like a plan.”

He does, stopping in some secluded brush, gravel crackling under the tires. El is straddling his lap before the car is even off, and once it is, she knows she has his full and undivided attention.

Mike kisses her. His hands are on her waist, solid and heavy through the thin fabric of her shirt. It’s some ratty old band tee, and she really doesn’t miss it after he tugs it over her head.

“Eager, much?”

Mike chuckles. “Shut up.”

She smiles, wrapping her arms around his shoulders as he leans in, kissing her sternum—hard and rough, teeth raking against her skin. Yeah, definitely eager.

It brings a sigh out of her, which swiftly turns into a moan as his lips travel even lower. *Yes, please, god.*

Mike lets loose some heavy groan, pulling her as close as possible. *Here, now*, she thinks.

Then and there is what she gets.

Much later, after a campaign that drags on for seven hours, they pull up in front of her house. Mike looks over at her, frowning all helplessly. “Don’t go.”

El unbuckles, scooting over and borrowing against him. “I don’t want to.”

She wants to stay right here, forever, with his fingers playing with her own and her ear against his heart beat. But she can’t, because it’s five minutes until curfew.

When she looks up, Mike is still pouting. His nose brushes her own. El’s eyes flutter closed. She lets herself get drawn in to the feel of his pulse against her hand, resting on his neck; to the feel of his fingers in her hair, of his lips hovering so close.

“I gotta go,” she whispers.

Mike shakes his head. It brings him far enough to close the distance and kiss her. Sweet, soft, amazing.

They go back and forth, caught in a daze. She loves the way his lips feel on hers. She loves the faint taste of his chapstick. She loves him, and she absolutely can’t live without him.

And that’s all it takes to make her stomach drop. That’s all it takes to ruin everything; because she *will* have to, and she might as well get fucking used to it.

So she draws away, forcing a smile when Mike whines in protest.

“Goodnight, Mike.”

He can tell something is up. He always can. “Hey,” Mike pushes her hair behind her ear, “what’s up?”

“Nothing,” El sucks in some air, trying to even out her breathing. “I’m just tired.”

He also knows, thank god, when not to push.

Mike sighs. "Okay," he says. Then he plants a last kiss on her forehead. "I love you."

El smiles for real, easily, then. "I love you, too."

She slips out of the car, hurrying up the walk to her house. El enters with a good two minutes to spare. Hop and Joyce are on the couch, cuddled into each other. *God, I want that*, she thinks, suddenly.

(five years)

"Hey, kiddo," Hopper says. "How was it?"

"Okay," El shrugs. "I'm just gonna shower and go to bed."

Joyce smiles. "G'night, sweetie."

"Night," El says, to them both. Then she hurries up the stairs to her bathroom. El runs the water and leans over the sink, watching as steam slowly starts to curl upward.

Now, forever, always.

And that's when she makes her decision.

-

six:

when we were young

-

The night before his eighteenth birthday, they watch Star Wars for like, the millionth time. It's only the guys, because Max and El are having a sleepover, which basically means by the time the night is over, his basement smells and there's a shitload of trash all over the place.

"It was a pleasure having you," he says dryly, as they clear out.

Lucas claps Mike on the shoulder. "See you tomorrow, man."

"Yeah, no, it's fine," Mike waves him off. "I'll clean this all up on my own."

Dustin grins. "Have fun, Cinderella."

"That was the lamest insult of all time," Lucas says.

"Uh, bullshit. My insults are well constructed and comedic, because I'm *funny*."

"You're *annoying* is what you are," Lucas argues. "I still can't believe you think that stupid purr is funny."

"It is! And it's a great Chewbacca impression!"

Mike and Will exchange glances as their friends climb the stairs, bickering over one another. "I'll help," Will says.

It doesn't take very long with two of them. Mike carries all the trash upstairs to Will's departing, "Happy early birthday!"

"Hey, Will?"

Will stops, halfway out the back door. "Yeah, Mike?"

He doesn't know what to say. He's just grateful. He's so, so grateful to have had Will this long, for twelve whole years of his life, since that first day on the swing set. So when he says, "Thanks for helping me," he means it less about pizza boxes and more about... everything else.

Will shrugs. "Always."

Mike smiles. "See you tomorrow."

In the kitchen, his mom is cleaning up the counter. It's covered in flour and batter and all the other residue that comes from baking a cake. Mike goes over and starts washing the dishes without a word.

"You don't have to do that, sweetie."

"I don't mind," he says.

They work around each other in silence for a bit. Then she comes

over and starts drying them.

“Need anything else?” He asks, when they’re done.

His mom studies him for a moment, eyes gleaming. “God,” she huffs a laugh, drying her eyes. “I’m sorry, I’m being silly, it’s just,” she sniffs, “you’re just so grown up.”

“Mom...”

“No, I know,” she nods. “I can’t help it, I’m sorry—”

Maybe he surprises her when he hugs her, but she relaxes into it eventually. She smells like Chanel No. 5; familiar and safe and comfortable. He can remember being five years old, nestled up against her side while she read to him. He wishes, very suddenly, that he could go back to being that small.

“My baby boy,” she sobs. Maybe she’s thinking about the same things.

“I love you, mom.”

“Oh, Mike,” she squeezes him just a little tighter before drawing back, having to crane her neck a little to look at him. “I love you, too.”

He kisses her cheek. “I’m gonna go to bed.”

“Okay,” she looks like someone just handed her the moon. “Happy early birthday, honey.”

“Thanks,” Mike can’t help but glance at the clock. Two more hours. “Goodnight, Mom.”

“Night, Michael.”

On the way to his room, he passes Holly’s, and sees the door is open just a crack.

Mike pokes his head in, absorbing the magazine cut outs that are

starting to cover her walls, and the yellow, daisy patterned bedspread. He wonders if it'll look the same by Thanksgiving, or if she'll have grown up a lot by then.

"Mikey," she practically shoots out of bed, grabbing him by the arm. She drags him inside. "Read me a story?"

"Sure, Holly."

Holly hands him a novel. He's pleased to see the front cover is adorned with dragons—seems like she's taking after him, thank god. *The Star Scroll*. "What chapter are you on?"

"Three." They settle on her bed, with her against his side. Maybe things like this don't have to end so soon, Mike thinks.

Mike flips to the page. "Pol had dreadful memories of his first trip across the straits between Radzyn and Dorval..."

It takes a chapter or so, but then she's asleep. Mike closes the book and sets it aside, before gently extracting himself from her grip. He leans down and kisses her forehead, thinking suddenly how much he'll miss this. It's not like he'll be across the country, or anything, but still.

When he stands, he finds Nancy in the doorway. She's leaning against the frame, smiling softly. Mike rolls his eyes. "You look like you're about to cry."

"Shut up."

She fixes him with some intense stare, eyes starting to glisten just a touch. "You know, you're really sweet."

"Nancy, don't..."

He doesn't know if he can handle this all over again. Why can't everyone be like Holly; just totally oblivious? But Nancy shakes her head. "No, I'm serious. You are. Now come with me, I have something to give you."

Mike takes her offered hand with some reluctance and lets her lead

him down the hall. "My birthday isn't until tomorrow," he says as she closes her door.

"I know, but this is special." She kneels down and digs around under her bed. "I wanted to give it to you alone."

Nancy procures a wrapped up... something. She pulls him down onto the bed with her and hands it over. "Open it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she nudges him. "I swear, it's not a bomb, or anything."

Mike grins. He gingerly unfolds the paper at the top and pulls out her present.

It's a photo album.

The cover is made of brown leather, not unlike the notebook El gave him for his sixteenth birthday. Just inside, there's a small inscription.

To my brother. I don't say I love you enough, but if you ever doubt it, here's the proof. -Nancy

That's enough to make him start getting emotional, *Jesus*, but then of course it only gets worse; the first few pages are filled with pictures of them together as little kids.

Her in a princess dress for Halloween with him in the stupidest cowboy costume ever. Them at the beach, in the basement, asleep together on the living room couch.

"Nance..."

She squeezes his hand. "Do you like it?"

"I love it." He wastes no time pulling her into his arms. Nancy hugs him back just as fiercely. "I love *you*."

"I love you too," she replies, voice wavering. "God, I can't believe you're all grown up."

"I'm not grown up, I'm crying like a baby."

Nancy laughs. "I just wanted to give you something special, you know? Something that was just about us."

"It's perfect," he says. "Thank you."

She shrugs. "I expect something just as cool for my birthday, though."

"Keep dreaming," he snorts. They spend a bit flipping through the photos, laughing at the stupid ones and reminiscing. It all seems like lifetimes ago.

His watch beeps, and right on time, he hears her voice in his head. *I'm waiting, Stringy.* "Shit, I gotta go."

"Go where?"

"A place," he replies vaguely.

Nancy's smile turns devilish. "You little player."

"God, stop," he stands. "Can I, um... use your window?"

She rolls her eyes. "Fine."

"And you'll cover for me?"

"Yes, you idiot. Now go, before you make El mad."

He's late, but she doesn't really mind. It just gives her extra time to make sure she doesn't look like a complete mess. Even so, she's starting to regret persuading him to meet her at eleven at night, in the middle of the sweltering July heat.

El sits criss cross on the cabin porch, waiting, waiting, waiting...

"Hey, Shortstack."

He looks good. Like, sure, he's just wearing jeans and some old shirt,

but in the orange light the ends of his curls glow like embers, and he's smiling. Mike Wheeler is absolutely perfect, even when he's fifteen minutes late.

"About time," she says, standing.

"How about we pretend you said midnight, and I'm early," he proposes.

El rolls her eyes. She takes his hand and drags him up the porch steps. "Are you ready?"

"For my super secret surprise?"

That makes El a little nervous, because what if he's expecting something better, something else? God, why had she tried to be romantic? He's gonna be disappointed, she just knows it.

Mike seems to sense her hesitation. He shakes his head. "El, you didn't have to get me anything at all, you know," he says. "You're all I ever want."

El's heart clenches. "Stop doing that."

He gives her a bemused frown. "Doing what?"

"Being... effortlessly romantic."

"I wasn't *trying* to be romantic, Shortstack, I was just stating a fact."

"You're doing it again!" El can't help but smile. "Okay, here's how this works: once we step over this threshold, only *I'm* allowed to say stuff like that."

"After," he nods. "So I guess that means I have to give you your present now, huh?"

"Mike!"

"Relax, oh my god."

He pulls out a box—a jewellery box, specifically, which means she

can't relax because he spent *money* and it's not even her fucking birthday.

Inside there's a simple golden chain. "It's for your ring," he tells her.

God, it's perfect. Miles better than the silver one she'd been using. It'll match, and it's probably real gold, and *why does he have to be so perfect all the damn time?*

El gingerly takes it, admiring the way it glints in the light. Mike silently works off her other necklace, slipping the ring onto the gold chain. She turns so he can clasp it, and shivers when she feels his lips press against the back of her neck.

"Mike..."

"No, I know," he grins. "Your turn."

Inside, it's pitch black until she turns on the light.

There it is, the blanket fort she'd spent hours making, trying her best to perfectly recreate the one in his own basement. It's bigger, and not exactly the same, but it still. She'd even added strands of twinkle lights, just because.

El waits anxiously, watching his face.

"I never thanked you," she says. "For taking me home that night, and giving me hope. It meant so much to me. I just wanted to let you know that, but I didn't know how, so I figured... my first home in my first house, you know? But this one can be for both of us, not just me."

That's when she sees that he's crying, but he's smiling, too. There's so much happy there it's practically pouring out of him; it's *beautiful*.

"It's perfect," he tells her. Relief floods her; she feels like a ten ton weight was just lifted off her back. Then he pulls her closer, cupping

her face in his hands and kissing her—all emotion and love, all Mike. “*You’re perfect.*”

El wraps her arms around his waist. “Happy birthday, Stringy.”

Sunlight streams over his face, making him look practically unearthly; skin so white it practically glows, dark curls falling into his eyes. She takes in the pink of his parted lips, the darkness of his long eyelashes as they flutter over his cheeks.

He’s the most beautiful thing El’s ever seen in her whole life.

“You’re staring at me.”

She scoots closer, encapsulated by the heat that radiates off his skin. “Was not.”

“Were too.” His eyes open. They’re gorgeous, brown, and full of warmth. “Happy birthday to me.”

“You’re stupid,” she pecks his cheek. “I should go shower.”

“No,” Mike pulls her close, nuzzling her neck. “It’s my birthday, and I demand that we don’t ever move from this spot, ever.”

“But I have more surprises.”

“Like what?”

“Not telling. That would ruin it.”

He kisses her, soft and sweet, lips chapped but warm as they move slowly against her own. “Please?”

“We’re supposed to meet everyone else at Benny’s for breakfast,” she caves, breath hitching as his mouth presses to the underside of her jaw, bestowing feather-light kisses all down her neck. “You’re evil.”

“Mhmm.”

El runs her hands down his bare back, relishing in the way he shivers at her touch. Mike melts against her. His hand comes up to cradle her head, making her stomach explode with butterflies at how soft he is, how gently he pushes her curls away from her ear, leaving kisses against it that are really just grazing, yet they still set her skin aflame.

There's something so intimate about this; being with him, alone, in the early hours of the morning. With the way he touches her, how it sends her into a mindless frenzy of needing more, wanting him, being close.

But it's only right that she return the favour, it being his birthday, and all.

El sinks a little lower, nestling against his torso. She runs her lips over his collarbone, loving the sound he makes—a hiccuping, undefined gasp. It's much more distinctive when she kisses him a little rougher, over and over, teeth biting hard enough to bruise.

“El...”

She draws back to just look at him; the tilt of his head and his flushed cheeks, eyes darkened and wide, pale skin now peppered with fresh red marks.

He swallows. “Why’d you stop?”

“No reason,” she leans down, kissing his forehead. “But we should really shower.”

“El, no—wait, did you say ‘we’?”

She smiles, slipping his shirt over her head. “Who else?”

-

seven:

a taste of forever

-

On a Friday night, her phone rings.

El's just gotten back from her shift at the library. She's about to peel off her clothes, with half a mind to sink into a bath, when she hears it.

"Hello?"

"Come over," Mike's voice whines. "I'm bored."

"But I was gonna take a bath," she says, flopping down onto her bed.

"You can take one here," he suggests. "Holly's driving me crazy."

El moans, glancing longingly at the door to her bathroom. Mike moans back.

"Fine," she says. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"You're the best," Mike gushes. "I love you. Have I told you that, recently?"

El grins. "Yeah, but you better not stop."

"I love you, I love you, I love you—"

When she gets there, he and Holly are sprawled out in front of the TV, leaning against each other. They both light up when she comes in.

"Hi," El kicks the door closed behind her. "What're you watching?"

"Danger Mouse," Holly says. "It's dumb."

"Oh, thank god," Mike says, quickly changing the channel. "I thought you were actually enjoying that shit."

"I thought *you* were," Holly says.

"Why would *I* wanna watch Danger Mouse?"

Holly sticks out her tongue. "Cuz you're stupid."

"Well then you're stupid too."

“No.”

“Yeah,” Mike pokes her stomach. “It’s genetic.”

El works hard to suppress a smile. “Can you help me with the groceries, Mike?”

“Of course, dear,” he replies, jumping up from the couch. He takes one of the bags in her arms. “What’d you get?”

“Stuff for pasta,” she replies. “It’s Holly’s favourite.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Mike, your parents have been out of town for two whole days. She needs an actual meal.”

He grins, kissing her cheek. “I *did* feed her, you know.”

“Yeah?”

“I made chicken last night,” he says. It’s so casual, but like, he *cooked*, she *shopped*, they’re *all grown up*.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll make it for you, sometime. I’ll wear an apron.”

“And nothing else?” She teases.

Mike laughs. “Anything for you, Shortstack.”

They sort everything out, but somehow end up back in the living room. They watch reruns of old seventies sitcoms, and by nine, El is way too tired to cook.

All of her beautiful domestic plans down the drain.

“Can we order pizza?”

He nods against her chest, where his head rests. Between his legs is Holly, who perks up. “With extra cheese?”

“Get me the phone,” he mumbles tiredly.

Much later, Mike wakes up from some hazy sleep. The television is on, as is the kitchen light (though it's vacant). El is nowhere to be seen, but Holly is half asleep on the couch, absently chewing on the ear of her oldest and grossest stuffed bunny. It's a habit she's mostly outgrown, only slipping back into it when she's about to conk out, but trying desperately to stay awake.

“Whatcha watchin’?”

“More stupid Danger Mouse,” she says, voice barely a whisper. Her eyes are glued to the screen.

That's when he notices the tear tracks.

“Hey,” Mike is by her side in an instant, removing the ragged stuffed animal from the equation and pulling her close. “What's up?”

All of the sudden she's curling into herself, broken down by a fresh wave of tears. “I had too much pizza, and Nancy l-left again, and you're l-leaving too and you're never gonna call m-me because I'm stupid and l-lame and I'll never see you again—”

“Holly,” he rests his head on her chin and rocks her back and forth; she's still that small (or maybe he's that tall). “That's not gonna happen.”

“You're not gonna leave?!”

She's so hopeful it actually crushes his heart into a million pieces. Mike loses all of his strength, head falling against the couch cushions, but he keeps holding her. “I have to go,” he says.

Her chin wobbles. “Oh.”

“But I'm gonna miss you like crazy, okay? And I'll come home every weekend, I promise. You can even visit me, with mom. And you're not lame, or stupid. You're the coolest kid I know.”

Holly rolls her eyes, a habit she no doubt picked up from him, but

she's smiling a little bit too. He takes that as a success. "You have to be pretty cool to watch Danger Mouse reruns on a Saturday night," she remarks.

Mike grins. "I swear it'll be okay."

"Sap," she comments. It's something she definitely picked up from El.

"Maybe," he admits, not really minding. "But I mean it. And I love you, a lot. Got it?"

Holly nods. Her blue eyes, the ones she shares with Nance, are still watery and glassy, but she still looks assured. "Got it, Mikey."

Then she yawns, and Mike doesn't really need another word. He picks her up and throws her over his shoulder, which makes her squeal like always, and then carries her upstairs.

El is in his room. Specifically, on his bed, with her legs folded and her left arm stretched out above her. The ring glints on her finger, and she cocks her head.

"Hey."

El starts. Her cheeks flush, which makes him grin, and she hastily works the band off her finger. "I was just looking," she says firmly.

Mike grins. "Sure," he closes the door and readjusts his hold on Holly. "I believe you."

She gives him a look; all vexed and provoked as she puts her necklace back on. The locket and the ring jingle as she tucks them both under her shirt, where they're always hidden. "Shut up."

She starts smiling at his expression (which is probably all starry eyed, but fuck it, she was wearing the ring again, god, he keeps catching her doing that), until her gaze rips away from him and slips to Holly. "Is she okay?"

Mike shrugs. "I figured she could sleep with us."

El nods, and so Mike carries his little sister over to the bed and lays

her down in the middle. She promptly rolls over onto her stomach. El slides in next to her, running a hand up and down Holly's back.

"You tired?"

"No," El's voice sounds distant. "You?"

"No." Mike lies down. He puts his head against Holly's left shoulder, her arm having already snaked beneath a pillow, and closes his eyes. El's fingers are in his hair a few seconds later, somehow just what he needs. She touches the nape of his neck, and his ear, and then his cheekbones. He loves her so much it actually hurts him just then, like someone's squeezing his heart.

Then his bedroom door flies open.

Max Mayfield is a rush of red hair and dark eyes. She kicks it closed behind her, probably leaving a shoe-print mark. Holly's eyes fly open.

"Max!"

Their eyes are wide, and Mike's heart is pounding. All he can think is *fucking Niel, fucking Billy, fucking monsters—*

"Your back door was unlocked," she explains, edging closer. "I... Lucas..."

Mike falls back against his pillows. *Here we go again.*

El pats the mattress next to her. "He's okay, right?"

"Yeah," Max scoffs. "Really great."

She doesn't need a second invitation, though. Max kicks off her shoes and curls up between Holly and El. His little sister doesn't seem pleased with the new addition, though (and Mike can't say he disagrees). Holly climbs onto his stomach and falls asleep within minutes.

"So what happened?"

He can't believe he's asking, but he also can't help but feel

concerned. This is Lucas. It's Max. They're stressed and arguing all the time, lately, about the stupidest shit. It's like Junior year all over again.

Max sniffs. "We just fought," she whispers. "It was stupid. It didn't even make sense."

El takes her hand. "You sure?"

"He asked me to come with him again, and I said no, that I had plans with you, and he can't just do that to Mike, y'know? And then he started yelling about how I was being selfish and putting our relationship in jeopardy because 'long distance doesn't last'."

"Bullshit," they reply in unison.

"Look at Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve," Mike elaborates. "They make it work, and they're all in different places."

Max throws her hands up. "Exactly! I literally brought that up! But does he listen to reason? No! He just went on about how every relationship is different and *oh my god* I think he wants to break up with me."

"No," they tell her. El rolls onto her side. "He's just scared, okay? He doesn't want to lose you. It's a really, really hard thing to go from seeing someone all the time to barely ever."

Max huffs. "That doesn't mean he has to be an ass about it."

Mike can't take his eyes off El. He can't do anything about the ridiculous explosion in his stomach, but he can't stop staring, either. Perfect. *Wow. Look at her.*

"He just doesn't want to admit it," Mike tells Max, without looking at her. El bites her lip. "Or be too dramatic about the whole thing, because then he'll make you feel like your relationship isn't strong enough, when it is, you're super strong—"

"We're no longer talking about me, are we?" Max inquires dryly.

Mike blinks. "It's all relevant. You are pretty strong, Mayfield. But the

point is, he just needs to know you're scared, too."

El's attention seems drawn to the sheets, but then her voice breaks through the barriers of his mind. *I am scared, Stringy.*

Yeah?

So scared.

He already sort of knew that. But he also knows that he doesn't even compare to her when it comes to handling bullshit. He's probably going to be a complete mess, with weekend exceptions.

Max clears her throat. "Can you guys, like, not? I'm in this bed, too."

Mike raises an eyebrow. "What are you suggesting?"

It makes them both burst into laughter. The tension bleeds away, like a light switch being flipped. Mike lets his head fall back against his pillow as their giggling dies away.

"Hey, idiots?"

"Yeah, Mayfield?"

"I love you both."

If it were any other day, any other time, Mike would make some teasing comment. But he only has the energy to reach up and tap her shoulder with a fist, which has sort of become their custom, by now.

El throws an arm over Max's stomach, though. "We love you, too."

He thinks they might all have fallen asleep grinning like idiots, which is how they're found by his parents the next morning. A mess of limbs and blankets, with the sun breaking through the curtains and yet another day of planning their lives ahead. They have each other, though, always. And weekend exceptions.

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eight:

how i love thee

-

August 10th sucks.

August 10th should go down as the absolute worst day in history.

Packing.

They're packing his things. His clothes, and his books, and all of his other things—all those things people take with them when they leave home.

Mike is in the process of taping another box, while she's trying very hard not to throw up.

"Fuck," he mutters. "Out of tape. I'll be right back."

El is left alone in his bedroom, surrounded by all his sweaters. They're splayed out on the floor, one in her lap—her very favourite one, with the little green diamonds and the zig-zag patterns. And even though it's like, eighty degrees, she pulls it over her head.

It smells like him. Like cinnamon and a woodsy cologne, almost like he's with her just then. El hugs herself, blinking hard.

She spots it, then.

A shoebox, sitting almost innocently under his bed. It would be innocent enough, if it weren't labelled 'stuff i'm too chickenshit to give my girlfriend'.

It flies into El's hand. She bites her lip, glancing at the door. It's too tempting not to look. Succumbing, El gently pries the lid off.

It's full of papers. Some are folded up, some are just scraps. There are other things, too; pictures with words on the back and sealed letters—not unlike the ones she was given a few months ago.

El frowns, unfolding one.

It's a poem. Like, an actual poem. She scans it, eyes caught on certain words and phrases. The end, though, is simple: *i'm not supposed to, but*

i do. i love you.

It's dated way back before even their freshman year. Thirteen, he was *thirteen* when he wrote it.

"Oh, Mike..."

There are so many more. Ones about her, about them. They say things she knows he'd probably never speak aloud, yet somehow, written out like this, they're not cheesy or over the top. They're just... him.

There's one on top that's dated in last month. It's just a ripped piece of lined paper, that makes her heart stop.

marry me means more than you know. marry me means more than i love you can say. marry me means forever. i think soon does too.

Footsteps. El scrambles to put the lid back on the box, hastily wiping her cheeks.

She slides it back under the bed just as the door opens. "Got it," Mike says, slipping in. He stops short as soon as he sees her, sitting on his floor in his sweater, with her face probably all blotchy. "El..."

"I found your poems," she blurts. It's all she can think to say.

Mike blushes. "Oh."

"I shouldn't have looked," she stares down at her hands, unable to hold his gaze. "I just..."

"It's okay." He comes over, sitting in front of her and ducking his head so she can see him. "I was gonna give them to you in like two days, anyway."

El bites her lip. A tear falls onto her lap, but it's only one of many—the many that have been building up inside of her for so long; from the fear and the uncertainty and the love.

Mike takes her hand, gently pulling her toward him. He wraps his arms around her middle and hugs her close, pressing his lips against

her neck.

Then she feels it. One tear, two. He's crying, breathing her in and shaking. All she can think is, has he been falling apart, too?

"Mike," El turns so that she's facing him. She promptly kisses his cheeks and his nose. He looks small and morose. "It'll be okay."

"I don't wanna leave you," he whispers. "I can't lose you."

It takes everything she has to sob. "You won't lose me," she promises.

And somehow, knowing he's terrified just like her, knowing he's desperate for things not to change even though they will inevitably, it becomes a truth. He won't lose her, she won't lose him. It's one of their truths, like *their love transcends heaven*, and *his hand in hers is comfort*, *his arms are home*. Their truths, like *you found me in the rain*, but *you're the sun*. Like *you belong to me*, *it'll be okay*, *we can make it through this*.

He won't lose her. "You're losing the sweater, though."

Mike laughs, holding her just a little tighter. "I figured."

-

nine:

they don't end

-

The next day, they make the drive to Terre Haute. The six of them, packed into the Wheeler station wagon. It's a complete nightmare; they bicker over the radio, who gets to sit where, and what they should do when they get there.

"We're going straight to the apartment," Lucas says, for the thousandth time. "And then we'll get food."

"Logically, we should eat before we unpack," Dustin says. "We'll need the stamina."

"You'll need a new ass when I'm done with you," Lucas grumbles.

El and Max exchange so many exasperated glances their necks hurt by the time they pull into the parking lot. The complex isn't exactly dingy, but it's smaller than El expected.

Her heart is pounding in her chest as they make their way up. Mike leads them, since he came here last week to sort some things out and knows where to go. He fumbles with the keys for a good few seconds.

"Mike, I will *kill* you," Dustin warns from behind his box. "Just open the damn door."

He easily unlocks it, grinning. "After you, dearest," he says. "Or did you want me to carry you over the threshold?"

"I think that'd piss off your side girl," Dustin jerks his head toward El, who flips him off with her free hand.

They drop their boxes in the living room. It's carpeted, unfurnished other than a small couch. The setting is so foreign it makes her skin crawl. *This is where he'll be, when he's not with you.*

(yet in the coming months, it will become her home, too. she'll have a drawer in his bedroom, she'll sit with him and Lucas while they study, she'll eat ice cream and watch soaps with Dustin whenever their visits align)

"Only fifty more trips," Will says.

They take the elevator each time, because there's no damn way she's hauling load after load up the stairwell. With the six of them, they finish getting it all up there fast enough.

It's when they start to unpack that things get strained.

"Dustin, for the last time, you *cannot* touch my tapes," Lucas says. "I have them organised alphabetically."

"That's too bad, man, because I already put them on the shelf."

"You asshole!"

"Dude, I'm just trying to help!"

“Well you’re *not* helping!”

“Hey!” Will yells, which he never does. “Can we not fight today? Please?”

It reminds them all of where they stand. The reality is, next week, Will’s flying out to California to meet Jonathan at the airport. Dustin is moving into his new dorm at Purdue. Max and El are staying behind in Hawkins while their boyfriends stay here, an hour away. Tonight.

El’s stomach drops. She busies herself by sorting through the tupperware Mrs. Wheeler bought them, putting everything in its rightful place.

“Screw this,” Mike says, after a minute of tense silence. “Let’s go get burgers.”

They walk to the diner, which is just across the street. As soon as they settle into the booth, El feels safe. She feels like this moment, with all of them together, promises something. They don’t end. Ever.

And they won’t. They’ll be okay. They sort of already are; they’re interlinked and connected by tethers that won’t ever fray. They’re the party. They’ll be more than fine, and she knows that in her heart.

Max groans quietly beside El, rolling her eyes while the boys plunge further into their latest nerd debate.

“Yeah? What about Spaceballs?”

Will shakes his head. “That was possibly the shittiest movie I’ve ever seen in my whole life.”

“I didn’t even think it was funny,” Dustin agrees. “I mean, how can you parody Star Wars? It’s like, the greatest franchise ever created. It’s flawless.”

“Oh my god, bullshit,” says Lucas. “It’s riddled with flaws.”

“Yeah? Name one.”

Lucas rolls his eyes. He leans back against his seat, challenged. “Okay, fine. How come Vader never senses that Leia’s his daughter? If all the Skywalkers are Force sensitive, and Vader can sense Luke, why doesn’t he know he’s related to Leia?! He literally uses the Force on her.”

“Maybe he does, and he’s just bluffing,” Dustin suggests, even though it’s so weak it makes the rest of them snort.

“And how about when they’re in Cloud City, and Vader has them disable the hyperdrive? Why don’t they just dismantle the whole engine?! All that does is prevent them from jumping into hyperspeed—he totally enabled their escape—”

“Alright, stop, stop—”

“And don’t even get me started on the holiday special—”

“Stop it!” Dustin throws up his hands. “I’ve had enough! This is against party rules!”

Mike pauses mid-burger bite. “What?”

“The rules state that one must never insult, over-analyse, or construct a negative argument against the greatest film franchise of all time—”

“That’s not a rule,” they all deny, as one.

“Shut! Enough! All of you!”

“Okay, I’m so done with this conversation,” Max announces. “Can we talk about something else?”

Dustin slaps his hand down on the table. “Alright, greatest movies ever made, one to ten—go.”

They buy milkshakes to go, run back across the way, and hole back up in the apartment.

“Wanna play D&D?” Dustin suggests.

They set up on the floor, with the map in the middle and all their figurines spread across it. Mike bunches behind his three-board-folder.

“Alright, so we left off in Elmar’s Wood. The party is scattered. Your ranger scouts ahead, torch lit by the everlasting flames of Galandria. Your zoomer is at your flank...”

“I, for one, am totally dead,” Max announces. “My health is down by half and I lost my fucking bag of holding, and you incapable nimrods didn’t help me fight off those warlocks at all.”

“I was busy with the cave markings!” Lucas defends. “Besides, we’re literally so close to the Black Palace.”

“If I die on the way, I’ll kill you.”

Lucas scowls. “Not if I kill you, first.”

El glances at Mike. *I’m so glad we don’t flirt like that.*

He has to bite his lip to keep from laughing. And that’s when it hits her.

She knows what she wants in five years. She knows what she wants forever. She knows what she wants *now*.

El takes his hand, mindless of everyone else, seeing the mirth in his eyes, the way they crinkle at the corners.

While everyone else bickers and freaks out about the possibility of more goblins ahead—or worse, a demogorgon—she knows what’s coming next.

Marry me had become less of a question and more of a proclamation; it means, instead, *I want to spend the rest of my life with you*. It means, *you’re absolutely perfect*. It means, *you make every day better and I can’t live without you*. It’s his not so stupid way of saying something more than I love you.

But underneath all of that, it still really is just a question. And it needs an answer.

“Hey stringbean?”

He turns to her. Maybe she’ll get one.

“Marry me?”

Author's Note:

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to be continued?
:)

Bother me on tumblr: @mad-maxxy